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ABSTRACT

By exploring the extent and nature of networks used by principals and their assistants, this article provides preliminary answers to the questions of how principals communicate with each other and the topics they discuss. Newly appointed principals and assistant principals (N=151) were surveyed, as well as a sample of experienced principals (N=131). Networking behaviors, topics discussed, and the frequency with which school administrators exhibit those behaviors were identified. A total return rate of 82 percent provided data for t-tests and factor analysis. Few significant differences are found by gender or administrative position (i.e., principal or assistant principal). Significant differences are found by experience, location of the school, and grade levels served. Those significant differences suggest that principals (and assistant principals) communicate most frequently about day-to-day operations of the school. They are most likely to communicate by telephone or at meetings. Secondary principals are more likely to talk about scheduling and discipline whereas middle/junior high principals talk about teaching techniques, homework, and grouping. Principals with varying levels of experience differed significantly in the topics they discussed with others. Elementary and rural principals network significantly less often than do their colleagues in cities and at other levels. Conclusions include specifying the topics that are networked and implications of the findings. (9 references) (RR)

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Networking Among Principals:
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Abstract

Newly appointed principals and assistant principals as well as a sample of experienced principals were surveyed in a southern state. The survey identified networking behaviors and topics discussed. Few significant differences were found by gender or administrative position (i.e., principal or assistant principal). Significant differences were found by experience, location of the school and grade levels served. Those significant differences lead us to believe that principals (and assistant principals) communicate most frequently about day to day operations of the school. They are most likely to communicate by phone or at meetings. Secondary principals are more likely to talk about scheduling and discipline while middle/junior high principals talk about teaching techniques, homework and grouping. Principals with varying levels of experience differed significantly in the topics they discussed with others. Elementary and rural principals network significantly less often than their colleagues.

Networking Among Principals:
A Study of Established Practices and Relationships

Teachers and administrators lead lives isolated from other professionals (Barnett, 1989; Kidder, 1989). One way to break that isolation is to cultivate contacts with others in similar jobs. Once those contacts are made, communication can flow. This process, known as networking, can lead to an exchange of information and ideas.

Furthermore, analyses of administrators' activities suggest that it is very important for managers to cultivate large networks of contacts (Dwyer, et al., 1983; Dwyer, et al,. 1985). These contacts are essential for information about pertinent events (Mintzberg, 1973: Yukl, 1989).

Business research has revealed that networks involve peers, superiors, outside customers, clients and suppliers (Yukl, 1989). However, in education the design and operation of communication networks are some of the least understood elements of administration (Knezevich, 1984).

By exploring the extent and nature of networks used by principals and their assistants, this article will provide preliminary answers to two questions.

- How do principals communicate with each other?
- What topics do principals discuss?

Methods

Design

The research was designed around three elements. First, a description of behaviors typically associated with networking was established (Yukl, 1989). Some examples of these behaviors were doing favors for other administrators, writing to congratulate a fellow administrator and talking before or after meetings.

The next task was to identify topics about which principals might be expected to share information or ideas. One well researched classification system of topics, developed by the Far West Laboratory, is used by Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL). The express purpose of PAL is to reduce the amount of isolation felt by principals (Barnett, 1990; Barnett, 1989).

The PAL components identify contextual variables (e.g., community, beliefs and experiences, district, state or federal programs, etc.) which are of concern to principals. The domains identified by PAL were used in this research.

Finally, after definition of those behaviors, the frequency with which school administrators exhibit those behaviors was queried by questionnaire. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether they discussed sixteen topics identified by PAL very frequently, frequently, undecided on frequency, sometimes or seldom. Similarly, the respondents were asked to describe how often they used any of eight typical networking behaviors.

The responses where analyzed in two ways. First, t-tests determined whether any significant difference existed as a function of such classification variables (i.e., respondents' geographical location, school level, sex, position (principal or assistant principal), years of experience in administration and whether the administrator was appointed from within the school). Second, factor analysis was used to discern the basic dimensions served as a foundation for all items.

Sample

During 1989-90 there were 151 newly appointed principals and assistant principals in Louisiana. This entire population was surveyed. There was an 85% return rate from this group.

Also, a ten percent sample was obtained from the administrators of the remaining 1,315 Louisiana public schools. A stratified, random sample was used for all geographical locations (i.e., rural, city/town, urban fringe and urban) as well as all levels (i.e., elementary, junior/middle, secondary, and K-12 combination). The geographical location was based on U.S. Census data using the schools' mailing addresses. The grade levels served by the schools were determined by consulting the Louisiana State Department of Education's school directory. There was a 79% response rate from this sample for a total return rate of 82%.

Results

Geographic Location

Generally, the topics and methods of communication did not significantly differ by location of the school with one exception. Principals in suburban schools discussed student discipline issues more often than did their counterparts in urban, city/towns or rural areas.

School Level

More variance was seen in the responses when the level of the school was considered. Evaluation of school programs was discussed significantly more frequently by secondary principals and least frequently by principals of K - 12 combination schools. Administrators at middle/junior high schools discussed program evaluation significantly more often than did their elementary colleagues. Secondary and junior/middle school administrators discussed scheduling, allocating resources and organization significantly more often than did elementary principals. Likewise, staffing was discussed significantly more frequently by principals at the junior/middle and senior high schools.

Discipline was discussed significantly more frequently by administrators at middle/junior and secondary schools than by either combination or elementary school principals. Also, the academic curriculum and class structure, assignment of students, student evaluation and promotion were more often discussed by secondary principals.

Moreover, teaching techniques, homework and grouping were discussed significantly more frequently by administrators at the middle/junior high school level. Both the middle/junior high and secondary principals communicated significantly more frequently about student outcomes (e.g., achievement, self-esteem, responsibility, citizenship, attitudes towards learning).

Demographic Differences

Gender.

Men and women administrators reported no significant differences in the topics they discussed with others. Furthermore, there was only one significant difference in methods of communication. Women administrators reportedly talked more frequently to administrators before, during or after meetings.

Position.

Assistant principals differed significantly with principals on only one topic--goal setting or monitoring. Assistant principals reported a significantly higher frequency of networking on goals. Also, there was a significant difference in only one networking behavior. Principals reported more frequent contact with other administrators than did assistant principals. Appointment from within or outside the school made no difference either in the topics discussed or the methods used to stay in touch with others.

Level of Experience.

More areas of significant differences were evident when years of experience in administration were considered. Level of experience accounted for differences in four topics. The four topics were as follows.

- district, state or federal programs or professional affiliations
- goal setting or monitoring
- evaluation of schools programs
- teaching techniques, homework and grouping

The frequency of discussion of the first item above showed an interesting non-linear trend. Those who were new to the job and those with the most experience reported significantly more frequent discussions of these issues. Administrators with three to eleven years experiences discussed programs or affiliations significantly less frequently. The same trend was evident in the networking about goal setting or monitoring and evaluation of school program. Finally, the most senior of the administrators reported significantly more frequent contact on teaching techniques, homework and grouping.

Factor Analysis

Analysis grouped responses into four dimensions--two categorized topics and two categorized behaviors. First, frequent networking occurred on topics best described as those

concerning day to day operations (e.g., modeling, physical plant, discipline, etc.).

Second, networking occurred on topics which related to planning. These elements encompassed goal setting and evaluating programs.

Third, a dimension consisted of methods of networking on the job. These included such behaviors as doing favors for other administrators, calling to provide helpful information and talking to others at meetings.

The final dimension revealed by factor analysis involved networking on off duty hours. These consisted of participating in leisure time activities with other administrators and visiting others.

Conclusions

Principals and assistant principals did not significantly differ in most of the topics they discussed nor the means they used to communicate with one interesting exception. Assistant principals reported more frequent discussions about goal setting and monitoring than did principals.

Usually networking occurred less among administrators at combination (i.e., K to 12), rural schools. In such case, the nearest fellow administrator is often miles away. Also, it is not unusual for the central office to be a long distance phone call away. When these rural principals did communicate, they

reported talking significantly less about discipline than their colleagues.

Also, elementary principals reported significantly lower levels of networking than did their colleagues. Since elementary schools often have no assistant principals, full time counselors or other staff to help share the administrative load, these principals may simply have less time to interact with each other. As indicated above, administrators often are isolated from each other. This research shows that isolation is more pronounced for elementary principals. This finding should have implication for inservice programs for elementary principals. This isolation must be broken so information about important topics in day to day operations and planning could flow.

Although usually men and women administrators network similarly, there is one clear exception. Women use professional meetings for more talk than do men. Perhaps this finding correlates with personality type. Women administrators, who are under-represented in the profession (Slater, 1989), may have had to exhibit a more extroverted personality to win appointment. Further research on the correlation of personality types, gender and networking is needed.

Administrators are most likely to network about day to day operations in the following topics.

- scheduling
- staffing
- modeling

- physical plant
- discipline
- interrelationships--students, staff & community
- academic curriculum
- class structure, assignment of students, student evaluation and promotion
- teaching techniques, homework and grouping
- staff development, teacher evaluation and inservice
- student outcomes

Since the above topics are frequently discussed by administrators, they could be useful for those planning inservice sessions for administrators.

The most commonly used methods for networking were the following.

- doing favors for other administrators
- attending social events or professional conferences where other administrators are likely to be present
- calling to provide helpful information or offer assistance to another administrator
- talking to other administrators before, during or after meetings

With these methods in mind, planners of meetings should allow more time during breaks for networking to occur. Also, most techniques are verbal, further documenting the importance of verbal skills for principals. Writing was not used frequently to network. Perhaps the pace of the job requires that the modern

principal be more familiar with the portable phone than the laptop computer.

Principals and assistant principals use established techniques to network with each other. These need to be allowed to flourish through changes in both inservice programs and the training given to new principals. Inservice sessions which reflect the most frequent concerns of principals, presented in a loosely structured format, would foster the use of networks. Training for new administrators should further develop their verbal abilities.

In summary, although principals appear to lead hectic lives isolated from each other, they do have established techniques which they use to break that isolation. Contacts often are oral, either on the phone or at meetings. They do favors for each other, but they don't write or visit often. Principals generally talk to each other at professional meetings, but they don't participate in recreational activities with other administrators. Networking occurs on the job, not off duty. These patterns largely hold true no matter where the school is located, what grade levels are served, gender of the administrator or whether the administrator is the principal or assistant principal. Secondary principals are more likely to talk about scheduling and discipline while middle/junior high principals talk about teaching techniques, homework and grouping. Generally, K-12 rural school principals are least likely to

network about anything. Their isolation is doubled--once by the isolation of the job and once by geographic isolation.

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Biographical Sketch

The author is Associate Professor, College of Education, Louisiana Tech University. Formerly, he was an administrator with the New Orleans Public Schools.